

Message Text

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ACTION EA-12

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 759
AMEMBASSY BANGKOK
AMEMBASSY CAIRO
AMEMBASSY JAKARTA
AMEMBASSY JIDDA
AMEMBASSY KUALA LUMPUR
AMEMBASSY SINGAPORE
AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI
CINCPAC

C O N F I D E N T I A L MANILA 1238

CINCPAC FOR POLAD

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PINS, RP
SUBJECT: SOUTHERN PHILIPPINE CONFLICT CONTINUES APACE

REF: A) MANILA 0835, B) MANILA 20205 AND PREVIOUS (NOTAL)
DECEMBER 23, 1977

1. NEWSPAPER REPORTS FROM THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES CONTINUE PROVIDING CONTRADICTORY ASSESSMENTS OF THE STATE OF THE MUSLIM CONFLICT. OPTIMISTIC HEADLINES--"PEACE PROSPECTS IN SOUTH BRIGHT"--ALTERNATE WITH LESS SANGUINE NEWS--"TERRORISM IN SOUTH MOUNTS." MAJORITY OF REPORTS, HOWEVER, PORTRAY SITUATION MARKED BY CONTINUING FIGHTING WITH NEITHER SIDE ABLE TO GAIN LASTING ADVANTAGE. THE MOST SERIOUS FIGHTING CONTINUES TO OCCUR IN THE ISLAND PROVINCES OF SULU AND
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BASILAN, WITH OCCASIONAL LARGE-SCALE ENGAGEMENTS IN THE PROVINCES OF MAGUINDANAO AND LANA DEL SUR; MOST RECENTLY PHILIPPINE MILITARY AND MNLF FORCES CLASHED NEAR THE MAGUINDANAO TOWN OF UPI, A SCENE OF PREVIOUS SERIOUS FIGHTING.

2. ONE SOURCE OF OPTIMISM FOR THE GOVERNMENT IS THE

CURRENT POWER STRUGGLE IN THE MNLF. SEVERAL REFERENCES TO THE CONFLICT BETWEEN CURRENT MNLF CENTRAL COMMITTEE CHAIRMAN NUR MISUARI AND MNLF FOREIGN MINISTER HASHIM SALAMAT (REFTEL B) HAVE APPEARED IN MANILA'S GUIDED PRESS, CULMINATING IN THE DAILY EXPRESS' FRONT-PAGE COVERAGE JANUARY 22 OF PHILIPPINE MILITARY'S SOUTHERN COMMAND CHIEF ADMIRAL ESPALDON'S ASSERTION THAT MISUARI HAS BEEN UNSEATED AS CHAIRMAN AND SALAMAT ELECTED IN HIS PLACE. OTHER PHILIPPINE OFFICIALS, INCLUDING PRESIDENT MARCOS, HAVE PREVIOUSLY INDICATED PRIVATELY THAT DISCUSSIONS HAVE BEEN HELD WITH SALAMAT; FOR INSTANCE, MARCOS TOLD CODEL WOLFF A "NEW MNLF LEADER," PRESUMABLY A REFERENCE TO SALAMAT, HAS SENT WORD TO THE GOVERNMENT OF THE PHILIPPINES THAT HE IS WILLING TO BEGIN DISCUSSIONS TO END THE FIGHTING (REFTEL A).

3. IN ADDITION TO THE FIGHTING BETWEEN MILITARY AND MNLF UNITS, THERE HAVE BEEN A NUMBER OF REPORTS OF ATTACKS BY MNLF FORCES AGAINST CIVILIANS. THREE OF THESE ATTACKS WITHIN THE LAST MONTH HAVE INVOLVED EMPLOYEES OF FIRMS WITH SOME US OWNERSHIP: FINDLAY-MILLER/TIMBER COMPANY, F.F. GOODRICH, AND ZAMBOANGA WOOD PRODUCTS. LOCAL ASSOCIATED PRESS CORRESPONDENT HAS TOLD EMBOFF THAT SOLE REMAINING MNLF REPRESENTATIVE TO CEASEFIRE COMMISSION, HAT HATIMIL HASSAN, INFORMED AN AP EMPLOYEE US FIRMS ARE NOW "FAIR GAME" FOR MNLF SINCE THE US IS HELPING MARCOS
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REGIME AGAINST MUSLIMS. EMBASSY, HOWEVER, HAS NOT RECEIVED ANY REPORTS FROM US FIRMS IN SOUTH INDICATING THEY BELIEVE US BUSINESSES BEING SPECIALLY TARGETED BY MNLF.

4. COMMENT: THE SITUATION IN THE SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES APPEARS TO HAVE IMPROVED LITTLE OVER THE LAST SEVERAL MONTHS. THE FEW NEWSPAPER REPORTS WHICH APPEAR CHRONICLE A STILL SERIOUS INSURGENCY, WELL ROOTED IN THE WESTERN HALF OF MINDANAO AND THE ENTIRE SULU ARCHIPELAGO. DESPITE THE COUNTERPOINT PROVIDED BY OPTIMISTIC REPORTS FROM THE SOUTH, THE GOVERNMENT DOES NOT APPEAR TO BE SUCCEEDING IN APPRECIABLY WEAKENING THE MNLF. THE GOP, AS WELL, MAY BE PREMATURE IN AWARDED THE CENTRAL COMMITTEE CHAIRMANSHIP TO SALAMAT. THOUGH THE GOP IS APPARENTLY CORRECT IN BELIEVING SALAMAT IS MORE MODERATE THAN MISUARI, INFORMATION AVAILABLE HERE INDICATES THAT THE COMPETITION BETWEEN THE TWO IS STILL UNDECIDED.
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